

Plain Language

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Presentation Outline

- n Why use Plain Language?
- n What is Plain Language?
- n Where can I get help with Plain Language?

Why use Plain Language?

We're all busy people. We don't want to waste a lot of time trying to translate difficult, wordy documents. And when we go to the web, we want to scan, not read.

Acceptance by the bank of payments in arrears shall not constitute a waiver of or otherwise affect any acceleration payment hereunder or other right or remedy exercisable hereunder. No failure or delay on the part of the bank in exercising, and no failure to file or otherwise perfect or enforce the Bank's security in or with respect to any collateral, shall operate as a waiver of any right or remedy hereunder or release any of the undersigned, and the obligations of the undersigned may be extended or waived by the bank, contract or other agreement evidencing or relating to any obligation or collateral may be amended and any collateral exchanged, surrendered, or otherwise dealt with in accordance with any agreement relevant thereto, all without affecting the liability of any of the undersigned.

Irregular Payments

You can accept late payments or partial payments, even though they are marked “payment in full,” without losing any of your rights under this note.

Plain language means fewer calls from customers

	Old letter	New letter
Calls per month (per counsellor)	9.4	1.6
Calls per year (10 counsellors)	1128	192

Veterans Benefits form letter
Jackson, MS DVA office

Less time for users to solve a problem (in minutes)

Type of user	Old rule	New rule
Experienced	2.43	1.50
Inexperienced	3.51	1.73

FCC pleasure boat radio regulation

Fewer errors and better compliance

	Old form	New form
Error rate ¹	40%	20%
Compliance rate ²	40%	95%

¹ Form to request free trees

² Livestock registration certificate

What is Plain Language?

A document or site is in plain language if users can -

- n Find what they need
- n Understand what they find
- n Use what they find to meet their needs

Common techniques of plain language

- n Organize and write for the audience
- n Use “you” and other pronouns
- n Use active voice
- n Keep sentences and sections short
- n Use common, everyday words
- n Use an easy-to-read design

Plain Language and the Web

- n Web users scan – they don't read.
Many web pages are too dense.
- n Plain language helps us keep our
web content as short and as
readable as possible.
- n Avoid bloat! Less is more!

Write and organize for the audience

Know their level of expertise

Generally, do not write one page to more than one audience.

Tell them what they want and need to know—not what you want them to know.

If you wanted help renting a home, what would you want to find on a website that was intended for renters?

<http://www.hud.gov/offices/hsg/mfh/hsgrent.cfm>

Informative headings help the reader navigate the document

Questions are often the best headings, especially if readers come with questions.

Agency Grant Program

What grants are available?

Am I eligible?

How should I apply?

Keep things short

No one wants to read material
like the next slide.

Employees of air carriers, their contractors, and their subcontractors, are protected from retaliation, discharge or otherwise being discriminated against for providing information relating to air carrier safety violations to their employer or to the Federal Government, or filed, testified, or assisted in a proceeding against the employer relating to any violation or alleged violation of any order, regulation, or standard of the Federal Aviation Administration or any other Federal law relating to air carrier safety, or because they are about to engage in any of these actions. *87 words*

Less is More

Many plain language techniques help keep your writing short.

- Pronouns
- Active voice
- Lists and tables
- Avoiding wordiness

Use pronouns

- n Pronouns such as I, you, and we pull readers into your material and make it relevant to them
- n Readers need less “translation”
- n Pronouns let you eliminate words

How do you use pronouns?

- n Refer to your organization as “we”
- n Refer to the reader as “you” in the text and as “I” in questions
- n Make sure you define “we” and “you”

Without pronouns

To establish eligibility for a voucher,
an applicant must show that the
applicant has a low income and
that the present housing of the
applicant is substandard and
inadequate. *28 words*

With Pronouns

To establish your eligibility for a voucher, you must show you have a low income and your present housing is substandard and inadequate. *22 words*

Let's do an exercise

Who May Borrow

Individuals and entities primarily and directly engaged in farming and ranching on family-size operations may apply.

Who May Borrow

You may apply if you are primarily and directly engaged in farming and ranching on a family-size operation.

What is Passive Voice?

1. The person doing the action follows the verb.
2. A form of the verb “to be” is combined with the past participle of another verb.

The frog was swallowed by Fred.

Passive Voice

Can disguise who does what:

A frog was swallowed.

Active Voice

Makes it clear who does what:

Fred swallowed a frog.

Passive Voice

Can be awkward:

Consultation from respondents was obtained to determine the estimated burden.

Active Voice

Is more direct:

We consulted with respondents to determine the estimated burden.

Passive Voice

Is often longer:

The application must be completed by the applicant and received by the grants office by June 1st. 17 words

Active Voice

Cuts the number of words:

We must receive your application by June 1st. 8 words

Let's do an exercise—

pronouns and active voice

Once the candidate's goals are established, one or more potential employers are identified. A preliminary proposal for presentation to the employer is developed. The proposal is presented to an employer who agrees to negotiate an individualized job that meets the employment needs of the applicant and real business needs of the employer. *52 words*

Once we establish your goals, we identify one or more potential employers. We prepare a preliminary proposal to present to an employer who agrees to negotiate an individualized job that meets both his and your employment needs. *37 words*

Use vertical lists

Vertical lists -

- n Make it easy for the reader to identify all the items or steps in a process
- n Add blank space for easy reading
- n Help your reader see the structure of your document

Here's an example

Studies about natural fire regimes for different ecosystem types, the effects of different kinds of fire on the landscape, the behavior of fire under different conditions, the effectiveness of foams and retardants and the effects of different tactics used to put fires out - these are a few of the areas that scientists continue to study.

Scientists continue to study:

- n natural fire regimes for different ecosystems,
- n the effects of different kinds of fire on the landscape,
- n the behavior of fire under different conditions,
- n the effectiveness of foams and retardants, and
- n the effects of different tactics used to fight fires.

But don't make lists too long

Research suggests that seven items are the maximum that work well in a list. Longer lists are hard to navigate.

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/>

<http://www.epa.gov/osw/>

<http://www.faa.gov/pilots/safety/>

<http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/>

Tables

- n Make it easy to take in complex material at a glance
- n Make it easy to locate specific provisions
- n Save words
- n Make your logic and structure clear

We must receive your completed application form on or before the 15th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you do not submit your application electronically or the 25th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you submit your application electronically.

Other plain language techniques

- n Use shorter, common words
- n Avoid abbreviations
- n Avoid “hidden verbs”

Use common words

Use

Not

Use

Utilize

Help

Facilitate

Method

Methodology

Needs

Necessitates

Limits

Parameters

Issue

Promulgate

Avoid Abbreviations

- n Readers complain more about abbreviations and acronyms than about any other feature of bureaucratic writing
- n Using abbreviations turns your material into a research project for readers.

Consider this example:

In 1965, the Social Security Act established both Medicare and Medicaid. Medicare was a responsibility of the Social Security Administration (SSA), while Federal assistance to the State Medicaid programs was administered by the Social and Rehabilitation Service (SRS). SSA and SRS were agencies in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). In 1977, the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) was created under HEW to effectively coordinate Medicare and Medicaid. In 1980 HEW was divided into the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). In 2001, HCFA was renamed the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS).

Avoid hidden verbs

Hidden verbs are verbs disguised as nouns. They are generally longer than their true verb forms.

n Conduct an analysis

n Analyze

n Present a report

n Report

n Do an assessment

n Assess

n Provide assistance

n Help

n Assist in the
characterization of

n Help characterize

Keep sentences short— especially on the web.

The move of the USPTO Data Center, the backbone of automated services such as the Order Entry Management System (**OEMS**), Patent Application Information Retrieval (**PAIR**), Revenue Accounting and Management (**RAM**), and Trademark Electronic Application System (**TEAS**), will be done from 6pm Fridays to 5:30 am Mondays to minimize disruption to employees and the public. *54 words*

Let's do an exercise

If you have further questions about any of the substances listed, more detailed information can be accessed by way of the EPA's Homepage on the Internet at <http://www.epa.gov> or directly to the ATSDR Homepage on the Internet at <http://atsdr1.atsdr.cdc.gov:8080>. 39
words

For more information about these
chemicals, visit
<http://atsdr1.atsdr.cdc.gov:8080>.
8 words

And another

The Open Door Initiative is a program based on a simple and fresh attitude: that the CMS desires to better hear and interact with those beneficiaries, providers, and other stakeholders interested in the delivery of quality healthcare for our nation's seniors and beneficiaries with disabilities. This increased emphasis on responsiveness is captured through an ongoing series of 'Open Door Forums' that provide a dialogue about both the many individual service areas and beneficiary needs within CMS. *76 words*

We want to hear from you!

Help us improve our service to you.

Attend an Open Door forum near you.

For information about upcoming forums,
visit

<http://www.cms.hhs.gov/opendoor/schedule.asp> *26 words*

Now let's look at some webpages

<http://www.cms.hhs.gov/providers/hospiceps/>

<http://www.faa.gov/avr/afs/index.cfm>

<http://www.fsa.usda.gov/pas/>

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fncs/>

<http://www.mbda.gov/>

<http://epa.gov/>

<http://www.fws.gov/fishing/>

Where to Get Help

For a free half day introduction to
plain language, email me at
acheek@patriot.net

Visit our website at
www.plainlanguage.gov